

The importance of adolescent dating relationships

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Abstract

Background: In recent years, an increasing number of studies have emerged that contribute to the explanation of the development and consolidation of adolescent romantic relationships. In this regard, Collins made a significant contribution to the previous models focusing on different stages; his proposal is focused instead on the meaning of each stage for adolescents. In attempting to find empirical support for this model, this paper analyses these couples' characteristics at a deeper level; all the areas identified by Collins were considered together: involvement, content, quality of the couple, and cognitive and emotional processes. **Method:** 3,258 adolescents (48.6% males) in Andalusia were surveyed, selecting those who had a dating relationship at that time (N= 1,202). Cluster analysis and predictive discriminant analysis were run. **Results:** The results indicated four distinct groups of adolescent couples, which were different not only in the participants' age, but in all the dimensions analyzed. **Conclusions:** These results are discussed in terms of the significance of these variables for adolescents when defining their romantic relationships.

Keywords: romantic relationships, adolescence, stages, social development.

Resumen

El significado de las relaciones sentimentales en la adolescencia. Antecedentes: en los últimos años ha crecido el número de estudios que han contribuido a la explicación del desarrollo y consolidación de las primeras relaciones sentimentales adolescentes. En este sentido, Collins ha realizado una contribución importante a los modelos de estadios propuestos hasta el momento, centrándose no tanto en los propios estadios como en el significado que cada uno de ellos tiene para los adolescentes. Tratando de dar soporte empírico a este modelo, el presente trabajo profundiza en el análisis de las características de estas parejas teniendo en cuenta, de forma conjunta, las áreas identificadas por Collins: implicación, contenido, calidad de la pareja y procesos cognitivos y emocionales. **Método:** fueron encuestados 3.258 adolescentes (chicos 48,6%) andaluces, seleccionando a aquellos que tenían una relación de pareja en ese momento (N= 1.202). Se utilizaron análisis de conglomerados y análisis discriminante predictivo. **Resultados:** los resultados apuntaron la existencia de cuatro grupos de jóvenes bien diferenciados que variaban, además de en la edad de los implicados, en todas las dimensiones analizadas. **Conclusiones:** estos resultados se discuten en términos de la importancia de la significación de estas variables para los jóvenes a la hora de definir su pareja sentimental.

Palabras clave: relaciones sentimentales, adolescencia, estadios, desarrollo social.

The last few decades have seen considerable changes in the way we understand and talk about early affective relationships among adolescents. Such relationships are no longer seen exclusively as sporadic, fleeting affairs driven by strong sexual desire, but as stable scenarios in which those involved are moved by close affective attachment and a sense of affinity and reciprocity to seek ways of sharing their intimacy (Collins, 2003; Furman, Brown, & Feiring, 1999; Smiler, 2008).

With this in mind, a number of studies have been carried out aimed at explaining how early dating relationships evolve and become consolidated (Collins, Welsh, & Furman, 2009; Yela, 1997). Although the different theoretical approaches adopted have coincided in analyzing certain aspects, such as the catalytic impact of pubertal development, peer influence and described differences

between growth stages (Brown, 1999; Connolly & Goldberg, 1999; Furman & Wehner, 1997), each model has differed in its description of how this new social scenario contributes to development during adolescence. Furman and Wehner (1997) focused their analysis on how adolescents attained social affiliation and intimacy, whereas Brown (1999) classified the different phases of dating relationships in terms of identity attainment and peer group influence. Connolly and Goldberg (1999) developed a developmental-interactive (contextual) model in which dating relationships would appear to contribute to the consolidation of adolescent identity and self esteem. Notwithstanding the important specific aspects addressed by these approaches, they all establish a series of phases starting with the initial encounters (Furman & Wehner, 1997) and infatuation (Connolly & Goldberg, 1999) characteristic of early adolescence, progressing through the casual relationships which arise in mixed-sex peer groups in the middle years of adolescence and ending in more mature, consolidated dating relationships marked by strong emotional ties with and commitment towards the other person (Connolly & McIssac, 2008).

Such phase models have been supported by a considerable amount of empirical evidence (see Connolly & McIssac, 2008; for

an overview), but it is important to take into account the difficulties encountered by many authors when attempting to describe and explain such a subjective, emotional process. Some studies have concluded that many young people find it hard to pinpoint the precise moment when they began dating their partner or to differentiate the stages of their relationship's development or consolidation (past or present) (Collins & Sroufe, 1999; Connolly & McIssac, 2008). Cultural differences also play an important role, because the way adolescents manifest their early dating relationships are heavily influenced by their ideas about love, their acceptance of social rules and conventions governing dating, gender roles and family relationships (Ferrer, Bosch, Navarro, Ramis, & García, 2008; Seiffge-Krenke, 2008). Some studies, carried out in countries like Spain (Ortega, Ortega-Rivera, & Sánchez, 2008; Sánchez, Ortega-Rivera, Ortega, & Viejo, 2008) and Italy (Menesini & Nocentini, 2008), have tried to test the stages established by Connolly, Craig, Pepler & Goldberg (2004), with results which differ considerably from those expected.

Collins' findings on the significance of emotional experiences during adolescence (2003) contributed to our knowledge of this phase pattern and also established an analytical framework that helps us to understand the qualitative and quantitative changes taking place in budding adolescent relationships. Collins' study considered five dimensions: involvement, partner selection, relationship content, relationship quality and cognitive and emotional processes. Involvement is taken to encompass the starting age, the frequency and the length of dating experiences. Partner selection – the characteristics of the dating partner – is an important dimension to consider when analyzing the significance and the impact of a dating relationship in the eyes of the adolescent, although Collins himself mentioned the methodological difficulty of its study: the adolescent's original motives probably alter as the relationship develops. The third dimension, content, refers to what partners do together and the time spent in each other's company. This aspect is closely related to the fourth dimension, the quality of the relationship, which may display both positive aspects (demonstrations of intimacy, affection, care) and negative aspects (irritation, conflict, control attitudes). The last dimension, the cognitive and emotional processes which take place as the relationship evolves, plays an essential role in molding partners' expectations, perceptions and attributions, with regard both to each other and to the dynamics of the relationship itself (Collins, 2003; Collins et al., 2009). With respect to the significance and impact of these dating relationships in the eyes of adolescents, the author added two important considerations to the five dimensions listed above: firstly the modulating effect of the partners' ages, their social and cultural characteristics and their individual differences; secondly, the need for a global analysis of the five dimensions (Collins, 2003).

Although Collins' results represented a major contribution to phase models, focusing not so much on describing phases or stages as on analyzing the extent to which dating relationships are considered significant by adolescents, few studies have looked at the overall influence of these dimensions on adolescent dating couples or at how they alter depending on age or relationship stability. Some work has focused on analyzing only some of the dimensions, such as the impact of relationship quality (Adams, Laursen, & Wilder, 2001); while studies carried out in different countries continue to examine cultural differences (Dhariwal, Connolly, Paciello, & Caprara, 2009).

In view of the abovementioned literature, this study aims to look more closely at the significance of dating relationships for boys and girls using the model proposed by Collins (2003) and thereby to contribute to the existing corpus of knowledge on the development of dating relationships, taking into account the relevance of cultural differences. To do so, we will assess the explicatory and discriminatory potential of some of Collins' dimensions among Andalusian adolescents, taking into consideration both the relationships between those dimensions and the way they vary during adolescence.

Methods

Participants

A survey was conducted among 3,258 adolescents (48.6% boys; 51.4% girls) between the ages of 15 and 21 attending 24 secondary schools in Andalusia, Spain. The sample group was stratified, the sample unit being the school. Sample error was 0.5.

Most of the adolescents surveyed (86.1%) lived in bi-parental families. 83.7% of them also lived with at least one sibling. Approximately half of the parents had completed basic education (43.3% and 45.6% of fathers and mothers respectively), while 26.1% of fathers and 22.6% of mothers had completed studies at university. With regard to work, 37.2% of the fathers were employed in some kind of trade while most of the mothers (47.1%) were housewives.

This initial sample group was filtered to select only those boys and girls involved in a dating relationship at the time the data was gathered. The definitive sample group comprised 1,202 adolescents (34.9% boys; 65.1% girls; average age= 17.08; d.t. 1.21).

Procedure

The students were surveyed during school time, authorization having previously been obtained from the families and the schools. The instruments supplied corresponded to a broader project covering adolescent dating and youth violence. The adolescents were assured that all information they gave would remain anonymous, and were asked to answer the questions individually and with total freedom.

Instruments

The measurements used in this study were drawn from two questionnaires. The first was an adapted version of the instrument developed by Connolly et al., (2004) for evaluating adolescent dating relationships and breaking-up experiences in the same. From this instrument, which had previously been used with Spanish and Italian adolescents (Ortega et al., 2008; Sánchez et al., 2008), four items were taken: *length of the current dating relationship*, *total number of partners*, *free time shared with the partner after school or at weekends*, and *number of break-ups in the previous 6 months*. The first two had open answers, and the second two were based on a five point scale. The second instrument, the Network Relationship Inventory (NRI, Furman & Burhmester, 1985; 1992), focused on analyzing adolescents' perceptions of the quality of their relationships with close friends and dating partners. From this questionnaire, 12 items were taken, each of them measured on a 5-point anchored Likert scale. These provided scores on three

scales – communication/intimacy, conflicts and future expectations. 4 similarly structured items were incorporated ad-hoc to provide a score for *power imbalance* between dating partners. These measurements had been tested in earlier studies with Spanish adolescents (Menesini, Nocentini, Ortega-Rivera, Sánchez, & Ortega, 2011), producing a good fit index. Once again, they were subjected to CFA with the present sample group. Result adjustment was repeated (NRI scales: N= 2312, 85GL; X²= 807.396, p= .000; NFI= .964; CFI= .967; RMSEA= .061- Lo90-Hi90= 0.57-.064; p= .000-; ad-hoc power imbalance measurement: N= 2433, 18GL; X²= 168.614, p= .000; NFI= .968; CFI= .971; RMSEA= .059-Lo90-Hi90= .059-.067; p= .000).

Data analysis

Cluster analyses were used to group participants by their similarity with regard to four of the dimensions described by Collins (2003): involvement (measured using the *length of the current relationship*, *number of partners* and *number of break-ups in the previous 6 months* variables), relationship content (the *free time shared* and *time spent in partner's company* variables), relationship quality (the *communication/intimacy*, *conflict* and *power imbalance* scales) and cognitive/emotional processes (the *future expectations* scale). The analysis made it possible to identify homogeneous sub-groups among the adolescents without revealing the grouping criteria *a priori*, and thus to form groups with members as similar as possible to each other while at the same time ensuring that the groups themselves differed as much as possible from one another.

The procedure was a two-step sequence: first, pre-clustering in which the data matrix was reduced – the data was randomized because its order in the matrix might have affected the grouping (SPSS, 2001); and then the actual hierarchical clustering, which

took place after the initial groups had been created. This type of analysis is more suitable for large samples and mixed variables (Martín, Cabero, & De Paz, 2007). It returns the best results when three basic conditions are met – the variables are mutually independent, the variables are continuous with normal distribution and the variables are multinomial categorical variables. However, the algorithm on which it is based is robust enough to produce reasonable results even when these conditions are absent.

The cluster solution was confirmed by carrying out a predictive discriminant analysis to find a set of functions which would allow new cases to be classified into the different groups as accurately as possible and to establish the proportion of (cluster-defined) old cases which would be correctly classified in their corresponding group (Catena, Ramos, & Trujillo, 2003). Using the set of variables employed in the cluster analysis as predictors and the native cluster as a classification variable, the Fisher linear discriminant analysis incorporated the correction for the group sizes. A jack-knifed classification procedure was followed to reduce the classification bias which typically occurs when subjects are used to compute the coefficients with which they will later be classified.

Results

The cluster analysis first automatically established the number of groups, using a log-likelihood distance measure and the BIC cluster criterion. The initial proposed solution of 6 clusters was adjusted to take into account the composition of each group and the results from other studies (Connolly et al., 2004). The analysis was then repeated, establishing a fixed number of 4 clusters with the characteristics shown in Table 1. Significant differences between groups were measured by means of an ANOVA analysis with Bonferroni's ad-hoc test for continuous variables and a Chi-squared test for category variables.

Table 1
Developmental phases in adolescent dating relationships

| | | Cluster 1 <i>Flirting</i> | Cluster 2 <i>Going out with someone</i> | Cluster 3 <i>Having a boyfriend/ girlfriend</i> | Cluster 4 <i>Being in a serious/ committed relationship</i> |
|--|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|--|--|--|
| N | | 174 | 335 | 218 | 210 |
| Sex | Boys | 30.4% | 41.4% | 29.4% | 31.7% |
| | Girls | 69.6% | 58.6% | 70.6% | 68.3% |
| Average age | | 16.83 (s.d. 1.23) | 16.98 (s.d. 1.17) | 17.02 (s.d. 1.22) | 17.35 (s.d. .98) |
| Involvement | Relationship length ** | 27.39 | 44.24 | 62.94 | 79.77 |
| | Number of partners ** | 7.33 | 4.61 | 3.20 | 3.42 |
| | Number of break-ups in 6 m (average) | 1-2 times | 1-2 times | Never | Never |
| Relationship content | Free time shared (average) | 2-4 hours a week | Over 12 h a week | 8-12 hours a week | Over 12 h a week |
| | Time spent in partner's company ** | 3.74 | 4.45 | 4.38 | 4.61 |
| Relationship quality | Communication /intimacy ** | 3.29 | 4.16 | 4.27 | 4.57 |
| | Conflict | 2.18 | 2.27 | 2.32 | 2.24 |
| | Power imbalance | 1.65 | 1.66 | 1.59 | 1.54 |
| Cognitive and emotional processes | Future expectations ** | 3.26 | 4.12 | 4.18 | 4.54 |

** p= .000; the table shows the significant differences with the immediately preceding phase found with a Bonferroni ad-hoc test

The results showed that all the continuous variables except for conflicts and power imbalance established significant differences between some of the groups being studied, the value of the variable effect being between .03 and .24. In most cases, however, the effect was medium-high (relationship length: $F_{(3, 933)} = 43.852$; $p = .000$; $\eta^2 = .12$; number of partners: $F_{(3, 933)} = 9.267$; $p = .000$; $\eta^2 = .03$; relationship content: $F_{(3, 933)} = 97.451$; $p = .000$; $\eta^2 = .24$; communication/intimacy: $F_{(3, 933)} = 81.764$; $p = .000$; $\eta^2 = .21$; and future expectations: $F_{(3, 933)} = 72.663$; $p = .000$; $\eta^2 = .19$). Qualitative variables also indicated a significant degree of association with the groups obtained: the results showed that both the number of break-ups variable [$\chi^2_{(9, n=937)} = 777.968$; $p = .000$; $V = .526$, $\lambda = .362$] and the free time shared variable [$\chi^2_{(12, n=937)} = 1219.384$, $p = .000$; $V = .659$, $\lambda = .380$] established significant differences between the groups.

The groups could then be defined by analyzing the characteristics of each one of them and performing a -2/+2 comparison with the group immediately following it (Figure 1).

The first group, made up of 174 students (30.4% boys) with an average age of 16.83, displayed the lowest levels in all the blocks studied: that is to say, little involvement in the relationship, an average relationship length of approximately 27 weeks, dating experience with just over 7 partners and between 1 and 2 break-ups in the previous 6 months; a low level of relationship content, with shared activity indices of around 3.74 and between 2 and 4 hours a week being spent together; relationship quality marked

by a low level of communication and intimacy; and lower future expectations than the other groups studied.

The second group was the largest, with 335 students. Their average age of 16.98 was slightly higher than that of the previous group, as were their scores for involvement, relationship content, relationship quality and cognitive and emotional processes. In this group we found a significant increase in the relationship length, the time spent together, the communication/intimacy and the future expectations variables and a significant decrease in the number of partners variable.

The third group was made up of 218 adolescents. Once again, both their average age (17.02) and the general tendency in the variables considered were higher than those of the previous group. This time, however, it was only the relationship length variable which rose significantly in comparison with the previous phase (62.94 as opposed to 44.24).

Finally, the fourth group was made up of 210 adolescents (31.7% boys) with an average age of 17.35. Once again, as well as the increase in age, all the blocks considered differed significantly from the previous group. Relationship involvement levels were higher, with longer relationship lengths; the scores for relationship content, communication/intimacy and future expectations were also significantly higher than in the previous phase.

On the basis of this characterization and of other qualitative studies carried out on adolescents (Sánchez, 2008), the four clusters were denominated as follows: the first was “flirting”, the

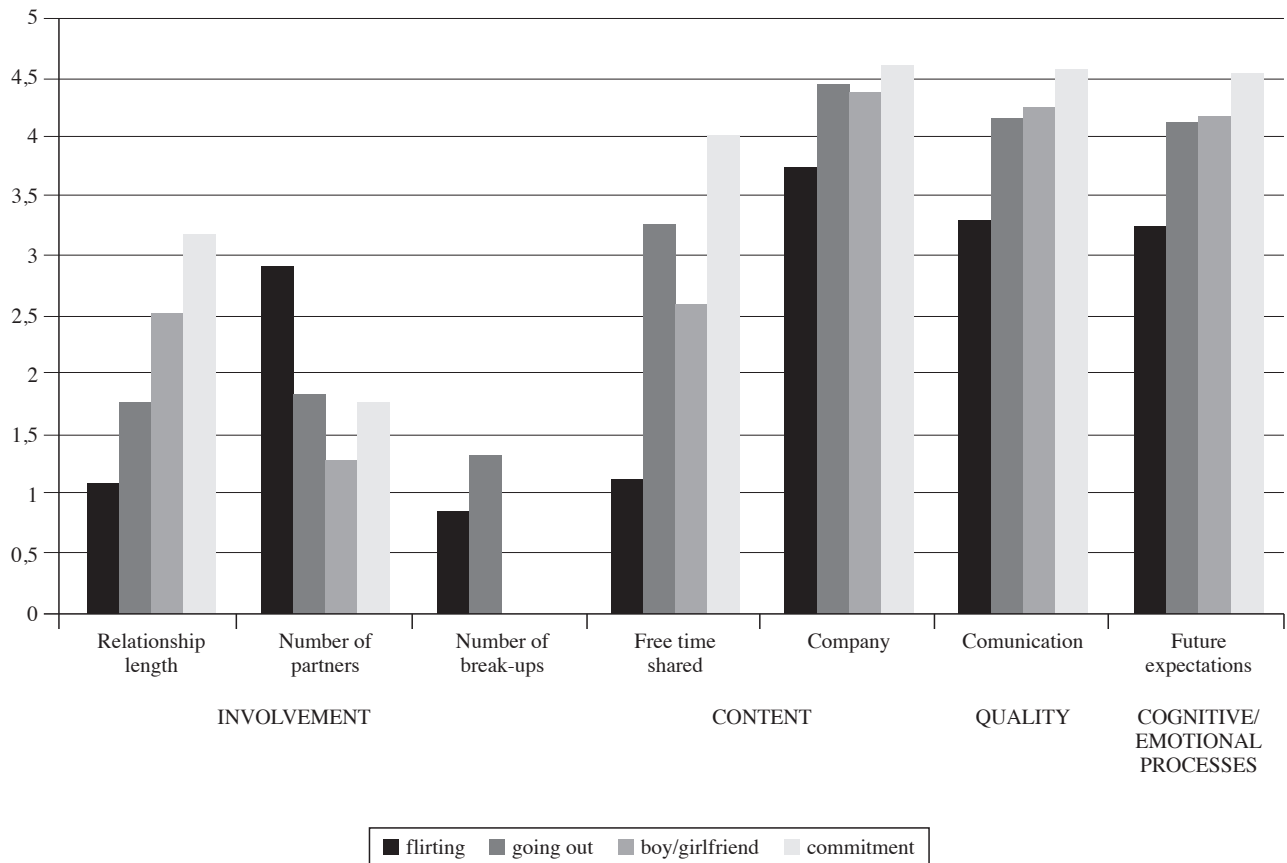


Figure 1. Development of adolescent dating relationships¹

¹ Ordinal variables have been taken as continuous in a range of 0-4, on the Likert scale on which they were measured. The measures corresponding to the number of partners and the relationship lengths have been scaled on a range of 0-4, taking tens and hundreds respectively as the original range.

second “going out with someone”, the third “having a boyfriend/girlfriend” and the fourth “being in a serious, or committed, relationship”.

A predictive discriminant analysis was then carried out to confirm this cluster solution. The results showed that 93.6% of the cases classified in the cluster analysis were correctly identified in the discriminant analysis. More specifically, the correct identification rate for the “flirting” cluster was 85.1%; for “going out with someone” it was 90.4%; for “having a boyfriend/girlfriend” it was 99.1% and for “being in a serious/committed relationship” it was 100%.

Discussion

In accordance with its stated objectives, this study closely examined the nature of adolescent dating relationships, with particular attention to the changes which occur in the dimensions proposed by Collins (2003) during the course of adolescence. The results obtained indicated the existence of four well differentiated groups of adolescents. These groups also vary in terms of the ages of the people included in each one. Differences were found in all the dimensions we analyzed, although they were manifested in different variables. In the involvement dimension, for example, the “flirting” group was characterized by more dating experiences but shorter relationships while just the opposite (more involvement in lasting relationships but little dating experience) was found to be prototypical in the “serious/committed relationship” group. These results confirm that the development of dating relationships is a complex, multimodal process with different aspects and peculiarities which need to be analyzed in depth.

Similarly, in the “going out with someone”, “having a boyfriend/girlfriend” and “serious relationship” groups, the results also showed an increase in positive quality and stable values, both for negative quality and for the amount of time spent with the partner. Many studies have described the gradual process of dissociation from the peer group and the forging of closer affective ties with the dating partner (Connolly et al., 2004; Hazan & Shaver, 1994; Kuttler & La Greca, 2004). In theory this process would lead to more time spent with the partner and therefore a more satisfying dating relationship - and also more conflict (Ortiz, Gómez, & Apodaca, 2002; Furman & Shomaker, 2008), but our results do not point in the same direction. The differences we found may be attributable to the age effect: although this variable is significant in the four groups considered, the average age in all four groups was somewhere in the region of 17. It might be surmised that the adolescents taking part in this study would already have started to move from the peer group to the more intimate context of a dating relationship and that the increase in conflicts would therefore have stabilized. Future research with younger participants and longitudinal analyses covering different trajectories would provide more reliable information in this respect. Earlier studies based on phase models have also shown that Spanish adolescents tend to become involved in serious relationships outside their mixed peer group at an earlier age than adolescents in other countries (Sánchez et al., 2008). This would appear to be an important cultural difference, and should be taken into account in future studies. Although we have not been able to reach any firm conclusions on this point, our results nevertheless show that, even within very similar age ranges, it is possible to find different groups of

adolescents who attach widely differing degrees of significance to their dating relationships, and this validates the model used in our study.

Finally, factors associated with an adolescent’s own emotional and cognitive maturity, such as the desire to be close to another person, increase during his/her adolescence (Waldinger et al., 2002), giving rise to the desire to keep relationships going and to higher future expectation levels.

The four groups obtained in our study may correspond to the stages or phases proposed by Brown (1999), Furman and Whener (1994) and Connolly et al., (2000), although the significance attached by Spanish adolescents to each of these developmental states differs from that perceived by those authors. The first and the last groups are those which differ the most, in terms both of the defining characteristics of the dating couples involved and of the significance of these relationships for the adolescents, whereas the groups in between are much more similar, differing only in terms of relationship length. This result would appear to reflect a qualitative difference in the characteristics and significance of dating relationships involving Spanish adolescents. The almost indiscernible transition from the second to the third group (from “going out with someone” to “having a boyfriend/girlfriend”) may be regulated by the level of maturity—both of the dating relationship itself and, at a personal level, of the two partners involved; it is a transition at the end of which the significance of the relationship will be consolidated and readjusted. Shurman and Scharf (2000) found that, at around the age of 16, the characteristics necessary for a relationship to be considered “dating”, in terms of partners’ requirements and demands, were less strict, or at least different, from those taken into consideration at a later stage of adolescence when the term “dating” takes on a much more restricted, specific definition. Thus, an adolescent prepared to assume a higher level of involvement and commitment would advance towards the last phase (“being in a committed relationship”), in which the lower number of dating experiences indicates a new concept of the term; otherwise, the dating partners would either break up or remain in the “having a boyfriend/girlfriend” phase, lengthening the duration of their relationship but not raising its qualitative characteristics.

In short, these groups seem to reflect clearly differentiated stages in the development of adolescent dating relationships. They provide empirical support for the theoretical model we wished to test and they highlight the significance adolescents attach to their variables when analyzing their relationship with their dating partner. The size of our sample group and the opportunities it offers specifically to focus on this particular age range and on the Spanish socio-cultural context endow this work with great potential for application at national level. However, further, more extensive studies still need to be carried out into other variables associated with each of the blocks proposed by Collins (2003) and their relative importance in this process. Future research might also address the fifth dimension proposed by Collins: partner selection.

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